



“Fifth Avenue and Forty-second Street”

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THE LIBRARY'S REFERENCE DEPARTMENT

By KARL BROWN, *Associate Bibliographer*

VISITORS TO THE REFERENCE DEPARTMENT of The New York Public Library are sometimes bewildered at first by both its nature and its size. Accustomed to browsing among shelves of books in the branches, they are surprised at having to consult a card catalogue to secure most of the books they want. They are occasionally disappointed at not being able to get a copy of a particular book they had planned to read. And they are chagrined because they may not take the books home. Most of these disappointments are lessened by an understanding of the character of the Reference Department. These notes briefly describe its nature and purpose.

The Library, a corporation operating under State charter, has two contracts with the City of New York: (1) The Reference Department, supported entirely by private funds, occupies rent free the building at 42nd

Street and Fifth Avenue. (2) It operates the Circulation Department for the City, with City funds.

The two departments are frequently confused, the assumption being that the Reference Department is the "main branch" of the system and that books may be borrowed from it as from the neighborhood branches. The common "argument" is that any taxpayer has that privilege. The best answer is the printed statement of the Trustees of December 10, 1913: "The Reference Department... is supported in the main from funds given with the understanding that books bought therefrom be used in the building..." Actually, three of the Circulation Department's branches in the Central Building — Central Circulation, the Central Children's Room, and the Picture Collection (in part) — are supported from Reference funds and do circulate books and pictures. But the two Departments have entirely separate collections of materials, designed to serve two widely different but equally important functions. The purpose of Circulation is to provide books for home study and recreational reading; that of Reference, materials for research.

Comprehensive as the Reference Department's collections are, they have limitations. Only small collections of books on law, medicine, education,

and natural history are present because special libraries in the city, also open to the public without charge, cover those fields; the New York Academy of Medicine and the American Museum of Natural History libraries are examples. The various information desks of the Central Building know about these special libraries and refer people to them. Again, the Reference Department seldom buys school or college textbooks, since these are available in various school and college libraries in the city. And again, it acquires current fiction only as a part of its research collections, not for recreational reading. Finally, it seldom secures more than one copy of even popular books; as it must *buy* them (only the Library of Congress in Washington receives free copies of all books published in the United States), it must content itself with one copy because of limited funds.

One problem a reader faces is how to find what he wants in such a large collection: over 3,000,000 volumes as of January 1st, 1947. Branches usually have but two reading rooms — adults' and children's — while the Reference Department has a Main Reading Room, seating almost 800 readers, which serves for general study and research, and various subject "Divisions," reading rooms in which are librarians who are specialists in those subjects. Our

reader finds in the branches a few shelves of well-selected books on American History, for example; in the Reference Department, a special reading room and some 100,000 volumes — books, monographs, periodicals, government publications, even pictures — and all of the paraphernalia required for scholarly research. Brief summaries of these Divisions follow:

GROUND FLOOR (42nd Street Entrance Level)

Music (Room 84): 100,000 volumes of standard musical works and literature relating to music, musicians, opera, etc. Fine collections of definitive editions of composers, history and rare works, and musical Americana; also about 100,000 pieces of popular music.

FIRST FLOOR (5th Avenue Entrance Level)

Periodicals (Room 108): Over 10,000 current periodicals, American and foreign, are found here. These are the so-called “general” periodicals; the Library receives some 15,000 current magazines, those of subject interest being housed in appropriate Divisions, e. g. Economics, Local History, Tech-

nology, etc. Bound volumes of periodicals are kept with the books, not in the Periodicals Room.

Science and Technology (Room 118): 325,000 volumes devoted to the mathematical and physical sciences and to mechanics; does not include Natural History (biological sciences, etc.). Has an extensive collection of patent records from all countries.

SECOND FLOOR

Slavonic (Room 216): 75,000 volumes, works in Cyrillic characters and in translation, of Russian, Ukrainian, Bulgarian, Polish, Czechoslovakian and other western-Slavonic literatures. Features of the collections include rare books from the Czar's library and over 5,000 pamphlets in languages of various U. S. S. R. states, some of which were reduced to writing for the first time for these publications.

Jewish (Room 217): 50,000 volumes, composing a well-balanced collection of Hebraica and Yiddish books, covering the entire range of Jewish literature and culture.

Oriental (Room 219): 45,000 volumes in Oriental languages or in translation, relating to the Far and Near East.

Economics (Room 228): About 625,000 volumes, covering both economics and sociology. The scope of the Division's work holds closely to economics (business, finance, statistics, etc.) and the economic phases of sociology. The Library has about 200,000 volumes of domestic and foreign documents, issued by national, state, and local governments.

THIRD FLOOR

Main Reading Room (315): Here is the most convenient place for general reference on subjects not administered by the special Divisions. Adjacent to it is the Public Catalogue Room where some 7,000,000 subject- and author-cards indicate the locations of the Reference Department's 3,000,000 volumes. In case of doubt, the Information Desk in this room is the place to start.

American History (Room 300): 100,000 volumes relating to national and state history of the American continents. Literature on the American Indian is featured.

Reserve (Rare Books; Room 303): 60,000 volumes; 500 incunabula include the Gutenberg Bible and rare and valuable works from early German, French, and other early presses. There are also such rarities as the Bay Psalm Book, the first three folio editions of Shakespeare and the first three issues of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, etc.; an extraordinary collection of early voyages to and travels in America. Card of admission, issued by the Director's Office, Room 210, required.

Prints (Room 308): 10,000 volumes, 80,000 prints and original drawings. A well-rounded collection of prints of all periods and of literature about them.

Maps (Room 310): Many thousands of maps, beginning with early American and European rarities; also a fine collection of historical atlases. Current materials range from the famous and indispensable "International Map of the World" to detailed plans of American cities.

Art and Architecture (Room 313): 60,000 volumes on fine and applied arts. Rich in illustrated works, fashion periodicals of all periods, etc.

Photographic Service (Room 316): As its title indicates, a service department from which photostatic and microfilm copies of the Library's materials may be obtained at a nominal cost. In addition, it supervises the use of micro-

film reading machines for newspapers of which there are between 3,000 and 4,000 reels. These represent but part of the Library's collections of micro-film, and there are other reading machines at various other convenient points.

Manuscripts (Room 319): Innumerable manuscripts, ranging from rare illuminated writings of the Middle Ages to records of the late New York World's Fair; extensive holdings of business records of New York firms. Has such rarities as Washington's "Farewell Address." Card of admission, issued by the Director's Office, Room 210, required.

Genealogy (Room 328): 45,000 volumes relating to American and British local history and genealogy. (Canadian material is in Room 300.) British county histories and heraldry are features.

Other features are worthy of notice. The twenty-nine catalogues in the Reference Department number over 18,000,000 cards — references to books, periodical articles, pamphlets, etc. In addition, there are many special indexes, as of first lines of old songs and poems set to music (150,000 cards, in the Music Division), of biographies and portraits of scientists, engineers, etc. (75,000 cards, in the Science and Technology Division), of theatrical materials (360,000 cards, in the Theatre Collection), even of outlaws and

peace officers (several thousand references covering 350 western frontier characters, in the American History Division). There are scrapbook series (pictures and clippings) on every conceivable subject. And there are exhibitions of books and prints, some changed frequently, others on permanent display, as the History of Printing and of United States Postage Stamps on the first floor, and of American Historical Prints on the third.

Its collections make it one of the great libraries of the world, comparable to our own national Library of Congress, Harvard University Library, and, abroad, the British Museum. Yet its position is unique. The Reference Department, maintained by private funds, as a part of The New York Public Library system, provides free access to all and thus supplements the extensive library collections and services provided by the Circulation Department whose budget derives from the citizens of New York City for use in its branches.

SPECIAL COLLECTIONS

Arents (Room 323): Some 5,000 books, pamphlets, and other material devoted to the history of tobacco; unique in its field. Its rarities include a



holograph poem of Alexander Pope, Queen Elizabeth's copy of Hakluyt's Voyages.

Berg (Room 320): To the original Henry W. and Albert A. Berg collection have been added those of W. T. H. Howe and Owen D. Young. Here are 25,000 books and 15,000 manuscripts and engravings which constitute unsurpassed source materials in the fields of English and American literature from early times to the twentieth century.

Spencer (Room 322): A rich collection of manuscripts and early books in fine bindings, representative of the art of book illustration. The card of admission which is required may be obtained in the Director's Office, Room 210.

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